

Sermons through

# Romans

## The Faithfulness of God

*Romans 3:1-4*

*With Study Questions*

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## Romans 3:1-4

**What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. <sup>3</sup> For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? <sup>4</sup> Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: *“That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged”* (Romans 3:1-4)**

### Introduction

As I was driving a group of children to a Bible-based youth program, I overheard them practicing the Bible verses they had memorized. It is very cute and precious to hear very young children quote Scripture and pray. And we can be confident that the things they learn at a very young age stick with them (Proverbs 22:6).

Having not been raised in the church I have often found myself at a distinct disadvantage when it came to the stories in the Bible—especially the Old Testament stories which tend to grab a child’s attention. As a new convert surrounded by those who had been in the church since birth, I was a bit embarrassed by my lack of knowledge of Adam, Noah, Samson, Moses, David, Daniel and so on.

And yet, I must say (hopefully without sounding unduly critical) that the knowledge of these Old Testament stories didn’t always appear to yield, what one might call, a credible profession of faith. As a teenager heading into the church, I found myself against quite a flow of traffic of other teenagers heading out.

We head into chapter three of Romans having read of the apostle’s dismissal of the value of circumcision (what might be considered a sign of inclusion in the church of the Old Covenant) in chapter two. We can’t overestimate how shocking that might have sounded to the Jewish Christian who was seeking to import, it would appear, too much of his Jewish-ness (misguided Jewish-ness at that) into the New Covenant.

In a modern context it might have sounded as if someone were to say to us that our baptisms, our participation in the Lord's Supper, our prayers, worship, reading of Scripture, and hearing of God's love, pardon and benediction really don't amount to much! This kind of statement might be shocking to our ears and I hope it would be. Yet it is possible that the church can still maintain the outward form of religious observance—even a form according to God's design—and be empty of saving faith. In light of these things, the Jewish Christian might be wondering if there was any advantage at all of being an Israelite the way a modern church attender might wonder if there was any advantage at all to being raised in the church.

This is where Paul begins chapter three.

**What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God (Romans 3:1, 2).**

### **Where's the Advantage?**

What then, was the advantage of being a Jew or being raised in the church? Paul indicates that there was an advantage —**“much in every way.”** **“Chiefly”** *protos* (firstly) **“because to them were committed the oracles (*ta logia*) of God.”** The oracles of God mean the declarations of God—the historical manifestations of God's word.

If a person desired to access the fountain of heavenly wisdom and grace in the Old Covenant, they went to Israel—the tabernacle, the holy hill (Psalm 15:1), the prophets, the sacrifices, etc. It was Israel, and only Israel that had the message of redemption. The rest of the world lay under the sway of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). Sometimes I fear that our little ones don't recognize what a **“dry and thirsty land”** this world can be (Ezekiel 19:13). We are foolish to think we can extricate ourselves from the church and still drink from a fountain of true wisdom—to somehow find ourselves nourished by our secular surroundings.

Not to deviate too far, but perhaps this is one advantage of our increasingly apostate culture. When we live in a nation that is

predominantly Christian (and don't misunderstand me—I think every nation should be—[Psalm 2:10-12]) we may think that the source of true wisdom and redemption might be found in government or culture. I think our current state of political affairs has given us a healthy heave-ho of such folly.

Families, societies, cultures and nations will thrive when they warm themselves on the hearth of God's oracles. This was the great advantage that Israel had. And yet our Savior was born into a world with Scriptures, priests and temple, all of which had neglected **“justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23)**, and were **“full of extortion and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25)**, turning His Father's house into a **“den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13)**.

So there is an advantage, but not everyone takes it. Some will turn their back to the warmth and light of the fire. And because of this, God Himself becomes the target of accusation.

**For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? <sup>4</sup> Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: “That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged” (Romans 3:3-4)**

### **Is God not Faithful?**

I was at the beach to play a little volleyball and a member of our church was excited to have me engage a friend of his with the gospel. Clearly, they had already had a great deal of dialogue and both were well dug into their positions. With a slight hint of frustration the man conveyed to us both, “You can only forgive so much”—clearly an allusion to all the evil done by the church throughout the ages.

Realizing the limitations of our current situation, for the man was clearly looking for an exit, I merely asked him, “Why forgive at all?” He gave me a puzzled look which I hoped would lead to future discussions. We can talk of this in q & a if you're interested in what I was getting at. But for now the question is before us: Is the rebellion of God's covenant people and indictment against God?

If a person sits here as a baptized member of the church—a covenant child or adult—but secretly mocks in his hearts or maintains a sentiment of indifference, is the faithfulness of God in question? Even more, if those within some form of the outward visible manifestation of the kingdom of heaven (i.e. the church) should behave in an egregious, faithless manner, should we conclude that has God not kept His promise?

We come to church and hear of God’s love for us, His mercy extended to us, His grace upon us. But if we should die and go to hell (for not all members of the visible church are necessarily members of the invisible church, that is, not all church members are necessarily regenerate), should we assume that God has failed to keep His promise?

Not so easily observed in English translations is the root word used by Paul three times in this verse—twice referring to men and one to God—a word that has been translated either “**believe**” or “**faith.**”

**For what if some did not believe (*epistesan—disbelief*)? Will their unbelief (*apistia-lack of belief*) make the faithfulness (*pistis-faithfulness*) of God without effect?**

Paul seems to be playing the faithfulness of God against the faithlessness of man. There is too much to address for now, but suffice it to say that God had made some glorious promises of what would happen in and to the world via the descendants of Abraham—a group of people Paul calls “**the circumcision**” (**Romans 4:9**).

**I will make you a great nation; I will bless you  
And make your name great; And you shall be a  
blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, And I  
will curse him who curses you; And in you all the  
families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis  
12:2, 3).**

**And he brought him outside and said, “Look  
toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are  
able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So**

**shall your offspring be.”<sup>6</sup> And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:5, 6).**

And the sign of inclusion of these great blessings was circumcision (Genesis 17:10), which Paul had now somewhat dismissed with the words:

**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).**

Do you see the problem? God had told this group of people that they would receive untold blessings and now, it would appear that the vast majority of them were enemies of Christ (John 1:11). There was only a remnant (Romans 11:5) who were faithful and quite frankly, this remnant, so far from being blessed, were still under the curse (Romans 10:1). I hasten to add, this is no mere history lesson; this can apply still today to anyone in this or any church who continues in the sin of unbelief (Hebrews 3:12). Let us take to heart the warning from the writer of Hebrews:

**Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later,<sup>6</sup> but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Hebrews 3:5, 6).**

Notice the “if” adverbial, conditional conjunction. The problem was not, is not and never will be God’s faithfulness. The promises of God are sure. But the objects of God’s eternal promises are those who by grace through faith call upon Christ. We need to be careful who we blame.

Those who fail in marriage are often quick to blame the institution of marriage as if it’s a flawed concept. And those who seek to acquit themselves before a holy God find great comfort (at least temporarily) in blaming God for His many shortcomings in handling the plight of this wreckage we call humanity.

Those in the church might blame Him for His lack of care and those outside the church might blame Him for the mess called the church. But, my friends, the problems (and there are many of them) are not due to some flaw or imperfection that we might seek to detect in God or the means by which He chooses to interact with a sinful world.

Paul answers his own rhetorical question with one of the most thunderous verses in all of Scripture.

**Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar (Romans 3:4a).**

### **God Versus the Human Race**

At the risk of irreverence (since Gary Larson, having drawn a picture of God for his comic strip, betrays his theological liberalism) I must say that the Far Side comic strip of God on Jeopardy is humorous and accurate. It shows the host behind the mic, God and the other contestant with their scores on the podium 1065 to 0. The caption reads, "Yes! That's right! The answer is 'Wisconsin'! Another 50 points for God, and...uh-oh, looks like Norman, our current champion, hasn't even scored yet." It's funny because it's true.

It's startling how comfortable we have become at putting God in the dock—measuring His eternal ethics and infinite faithfulness via the yardstick of our creaturely "enlightenment." The verse specifically has to do with God's covenant faithfulness against man's faithlessness, but it can, I believe, be safely applied to everything. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's brilliant detective, Sherlock Holmes, famously said, "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth."

I hasten to say that there is nothing improbable about the existence of God or the oracles which proceed from His word; nonetheless, you get the point. Paul is saying that the impossible is that God would somehow fall short in the area of truth—so even if the entire world were to line up on the other side of the aisle... uh-oh, our current champion hasn't scored yet. Paul then brings forward a very remarkable passage to strengthen his point.

**As it is written: “That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged” (Romans 3:4b).**

## **A Judged and Justified God**

The “you” in this verse is referring to God. It is remarkable that God would be judged and that He somehow needs to be “justified” which here means to render a favorable verdict. Apparently the inclination to judge God is nothing new. This reference used by Paul is taken from Psalm 51 where David records his own response to a confrontation by Nathan the Prophet regarding his great sin with Bathsheba—keeping in mind that David, along with Moses, would have been held in very high esteem among those who were the objects of Paul’s correction.

In light of his sin, David calls upon the **“mercy”** and **“lovingkindness”** of God. He beseeches God to **“blot”** out his **“transgressions”** and **“wash”** him from his **“sin.”** David acknowledged his **“transgressions”** and sin against God and that he had done evil in God’s sight then he records the words used by Paul: **“That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge” (Psalm 51:4).**

David knew that his behavior had given occasion for **“the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (2 Samuel 12:14)**—that it was an embarrassment. But David also acknowledged that the problem was with him, not God. In fact it would be God’s just judgment of him that would extol God—so God took opportunity to declare His righteousness by exposing the unrighteousness of David.

This brings me back to my friend at the beach. What my friend’s friend didn’t understand was that the moment he said you can only forgive so much, he was calling upon something or someone (that he, no doubt could not identify) greater than himself by which human conduct should be evaluated. And who is that, if not God?

One final point: When David was confronted with his most heinous sin, he did not seek comfort or take solace in his circumcision or in being a covenant child (again, not that there wasn’t great value in these things). David called upon God to



**“purge”** him **“with hyssop.”** Hyssop was a plant they would dip in blood and sprinkle on things and people that they might be cleansed (Numbers 19:18). And of course, like all the sacrifices, the blood points to the blood of Christ.

Whether it is the sacrifices of the Old Covenant or the sacraments of the new, if our minds are not swept to the Christ of the cross, whose blood was shed for the remission of sins, our religious observances are meaningless—or even worse, become a judgment against us. But if these things are done in faith (not to jump too far ahead) then not only is God vindicated in His judgments, we are justified—acquitted—before His holy bar of judgment.

### Questions for Study

1. Was there any advantage to being Jewish when Paul was writing this letter? Is there any advantage to being raised in the church (pages 2, 3)?
2. If one is raised in the church, does it mean they are truly saved (page 3)?
3. How did people access God’s wisdom and grace in the Old Covenant? In the New Covenant (page 3)?
4. God made promises to Israel in the Old Testament, yet some Israelites did not receive those promises. Did God not keep His promise (pages 4-6)?
5. The writer of Hebrews issues a warning in Hebrews 3:5, 6. What is the warning and how should we heed it (page 6)?
6. In what ways do we see people blaming God? What is Paul’s answer to this accusation (pages 6, 7)?
7. Can you think of examples where the world is against God? Who do you suppose is right and why (page 7)?

8. Discuss Paul's quote from David. Why do you think he uses that quote (page 8)?
9. What did David seek for his comfort and forgiveness? What do you seek (pages 8, 9)?